

Modern World History Online

Boko Haram insurgent war

PRINCIPAL COMBATANTS: Governments of Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger (with participation by vigilante and militia groups as well as mercenary soldiers and material support from the United States, Benin, United Kingdom, France, Peoples Republic of China, Canada, Iran, and Israel) vs. Boko Haram (affiliated with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria [ISIS] and associated with Ansaru, a Boko Haram splinter group)

PRINCIPAL THEATER(S): Mainly northern Nigeria, with spillover fighting in Cameroon, Niger, and Chad

DECLARATION: State of emergency declared in three northern states, Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa, on May 14, 2013

MAJOR ISSUES AND OBJECTIVES: Boko Haram is a radical Islamist jihadist group associated (since March 2015) with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and dedicated to overthrowing the Nigerian government and establishing in its place an Islamic state, governed under sharia law; presumably this state would be part of the caliphate (regional Islamic state) ISIS seeks to establish throughout northern Africa and the Middle East. The governments of Nigeria and neighboring states seek to suppress the insurgency.

OUTCOME: Ongoing

APPROXIMATE MAXIMUM NUMBER OF MEN UNDER ARMS: Principal government forces, the Nigerian Army (and reserves), 162,000; Nigerian Police Force, 371,800; Cameroon Armed Forces, 20,000; African Union force, 8,700; Boko Haram strength is estimated at between 7,000 and 10,000, but its association with ISIS potentially gives the group access to more.

CASUALTIES: 15,000 estimated killed (mostly noncombatant civilians); at least a million persons have been displaced.

TREATIES: None

Historical Background

Among the hundreds of ethnic groups in Nigeria there are three groups that form regional majorities: the Muslim Hausa-Fulani dominate the north, the Yoruba form a majority in the urban centers of the southwest, and the primarily Christian Igbo are the largest group in the southeast. The present territory of Nigeria was created in 1914, when British colonial forces merged northern Nigeria, formerly under the rule of the Sokoto Caliphate, and southern Nigeria, which had long been governed by the British National African Company, into the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria. Although this reorganization unified the country into a single colony, the colonial government continued to administer the northern and southern regions separately. This exacerbated existing cultural differences, thereby driving a wedge between the regions. A British schooling system was established in the south, and Christian missionaries, who had long been present in the south, continued their activities there. The Muslim north, on the other hand, strongly resisted Christian missionary activity, and the population rejected British schooling considering it a vehicle for Christian indoctrination.

Following independence in 1960 the country was defined as a federal republic composed of three states, each dominated by one of the three ethnic groups. However, economic, political, religious, and cultural differences soon led to strife and civil war, culminating in the Nigerian-Biafra War (1967-1970) that cost the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. Coups and countercoups alternated for several decades. The cycle seemed finally broken in 1999, when the government returned to civilian rule. Still, ethnic conflict continued.

The success of the 1999 constitution was in part achieved by granting greater autonomy to the states. This autonomy allowed 12 northern states to finally introduce Islamic sharia law, a goal they had long pursued unsuccessfully. Although only two, Zamfara and Kano, have made serious efforts at implementing the law, some see the introduction of Islamic law as a sign of increased religious radicalization in the country.

Boko Haram Uprising of 2009

Boko Haram, which means “Western education is forbidden,” is the popular name for an organization whose official Arabic name translates as “People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet’s Teachings and Jihad.” Concentrated in Nigeria’s northeastern area, Boko Haram is also present in southwestern Chad, southeastern Niger, and northern Cameroon. Since its founding in 2002, Boko Haram has become increasingly radicalized in its fundamentalist approach to Islam. It remained mostly peaceful, however, until 2009.

In July 2009, after the government began arresting high-profile members in response to reports that the group was arming itself, Boko Haram staged an uprising in Bauchi State, resulting in some 700 deaths, including that of Mohammed Yusuf, Boko Haram’s founder, who was killed while in police custody. His death elevated Abubakar Shekau to leadership.

The 2009 uprising resulted in considerable damage to government buildings, non-Muslim schools, and to churches; however, the violence was quickly put down. But in January 2010, Boko Haram launched what is generally considered its first terrorist attack, killing four in the state of Borno. In September of that year, the group engineered a prison break at Bauchi, liberating more than 700 of its members.

The prison assault and break marked a general resurgence of Boko Haram militancy, during which the group escalated from attacks on obviously vulnerable civilian targets of opportunity to police stations and, in the Nigerian capital, Abuja, a UN operational office. By the end of 2011, suicide bombings had become a prominent feature of Boko Haram attacks.

State of Emergency, Terrorism, 2013-2014

On May 14, 2013, the Nigerian government proclaimed a state of emergency in the three northeastern states of Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa. Repeatedly humiliated and under increasing popular pressure, Nigerian government forces mounted highly aggressive operations against Boko Haram militants in the area. The war increasingly came to be characterized by terrorism on one hand and by military and police brutality and human rights violations on the other. Although the initial government surge was successful in flushing out rebel forces, Boko Haram quickly regained its footing and stormed back in July, unleashing a massacre against government schools in Yobe.

The group came to worldwide attention on April 15, 2014, when members stormed a school in the village of Chibok, Borno, and abducted some 276 female students. Fifty-seven girls escaped; those who could not were reportedly taken to Cameroon and Chad to be sold into marriage. The Chibok abductions galvanized public opinion both in Nigeria and the West, and there were vows from local politicians as well as international leaders to secure the return of the girls at all costs. Nigerians even launched a social media campaign on Twitter under the hashtag #bringbackourgirls. Yet, despite promises, no significant foreign aid was forthcoming. Nothing has been heard of the girls since their abduction.

A month after the Chibok abductions, Boko Haram detonated a pair of bombs in Jos, the state capital of Plateau in central Nigeria. Some 118 people were killed in the blasts and 56 others were wounded. The bombs were planted and timed to cause maximum terror. The first blast brought rescue workers to the scene, some of whom were killed by the explosion of the second bomb, which had been set to detonate 30 minutes after the first.

Insurgent Escalation and Regional Offensive, 2014-2015

Boko Haram captured a number of towns in northeastern Nigeria late in 2014, prompting Nigerian armed forces to join with troops from Chad, Niger, and Cameroon in a counteroffensive that retook many of these places. However, despite the inroads made by the government counteroffensive, 2015 began with an attack, on January 3, on Baga, near Lake Chad, that killed as many as 2,000—by far the worst massacre the insurgents had perpetrated. A succession of attacks followed in February and March, including several suicide bombings and kidnappings. In the midst of the counterinsurgency, on March 7, 2015, Abubakar Shekau announced—via Twitter—Boko Haram’s allegiance to and affiliation with the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), a terrorist group in the Middle East that seeks to establish an international Islamic state, beginning with territory in Syria and Iraq.

In April 2015, the government of Muhammadu Buhari, a military officer from the north who had been elected president on April 1 on a promise to eradicate Boko Haram, reported significant gains against the group, including the recovery of all northeastern territory except for the Sambisa Forest. In December of that year the president announced that his government had "technically won the war." However, many considered the statement premature as Boko Haram continued its almost weekly attacks, including one on Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State, just four days after the president's announcement that killed more than 50 people.

Further Information

Virginia Comolli, *Boko Haram: Nigeria's Islamist Insurgency* (London: Hurst, 2015); Alex Perry, *The Hunt for Boko Haram: Investigating the Terror Tearing Nigeria Apart* (New York: Newsweek Insights, 2014); Mike Smith, *Boko Haram: Inside Nigeria's Unholy War* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2015).

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